

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE **1P**PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER
6 October 1986

Veteran reporter was first victim of anti-Gadhafi deception effort

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WASHINGTON — It was not long after prize-winning reporter John Walcott joined the Wall Street Journal last summer that he apparently fell victim to the Reagan administration's propaganda campaign against Libya's Moammar Gadhafi.

"It now seems clear that some high administration officials misled us," conceded Journal managing editor Norman Pearlstine.

The "disinformation" campaign, undertaken in August against Gadhafi and revealed Thursday by the Washington Post, was not aimed at U.S. reporters, White House spokesman Larry Speakes insists. Few reporters here believe him.

That's because Walcott produced a front-page story published on Aug. 25 in the Journal containing misleading information that said the United States might launch a second military attack on Gadhafi. Many other reporters based stories on it after Speakes called it "authoritative."

Eleven days earlier, President Reagan had approved a proposal by his national security adviser, John M. Poindexter, to scare Gadhafi with "disinformation" that "the U.S. is about to move against him militarily," according to a memo leaked to the Post.

The bogus information subsequently turned up in the pages of the Journal and other U.S. newspapers. But a survey of European, North African and Middle Eastern press reports for the month after Aug. 14 turned up little evidence of a disinformation campaign abroad.

One exception was the Greek press, which cited CIA and Pentagon sources as saying Greece was about to be targeted by Gadhafi's terrorists. Editorials in the London Daily Telegraph and Paris' Le Monde pooh-poohed the alarm about Gadhafi, with Le Monde suggesting that the Reagan administration had "perhaps launched a deliberate campaign of disinformation."

Not true then and not true now, according to Reagan himself.

"We are not telling lies or doing any of those disinformation things," the President said Friday.

What really happened, according to four analysts close to administra-



John M. Poindexter
President's national security adviser

tion policy-making on Libya, is that Walcott, 37, a well-connected former Newsweek reporter who sometimes scooped rivals with stories involving Gadhafi, was misled by a familiar source or sources.

Walcott — who covered foreign affairs for nine years at Newsweek's Washington bureau, won awards from the Overseas Press Club and the National Press Club and now is working on a book about terrorism — says he had numerous sources for his original story.

Only a single source has surfaced so far, however: Howard R. Teicher, a low-profile National Security Council aide and a specialist on the Middle East, terrorism and Libya. Walcott has promised to elaborate in a story scheduled to appear in the Journal today.

At the time Walcott and Teicher spoke, "there was a large element within the administration that was trying to bait Gadhafi into doing something, so that he looked nuts, so we could go in again and this time do a lot of damage," according to Robert H. Kupperman, a counterterrorism specialist at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies and a White House consultant on terrorism.

Three other analysts, who asked

not to be identified, offered similar accounts, adding that State Department officials resisted provoking Gadhafi. Moreover, as contemplated at State, "the disinformation campaign wasn't supposed to be public, involving the press. It was supposed to be secret and involve tricking Libyan intelligence into thinking the U.S. was about to move militarily," according to a State Department consultant on Libya.

If Walcott got caught up in this maneuvering, it was not the first time his sources had misled him on Libya. For example, Walcott warned in an exclusive Newsweek story Nov. 30, 1981, that Reagan was not the only target being stalked by an alleged Libyan assassination squad working inside the United States.

"Officials say Gadhafi has expanded his hit list to include Vice President George Bush, Secretary of State Alexander Haig and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger — and that he has equipped special assassination squads with bazookas, grenade launchers and even portable SAM-7 missiles capable of bringing down the President's plane," Walcott wrote.

No U.S. authority was quoted by name in that account, or in the Aug. 25 story, to which the Journal's Egypt correspondent, Gerald F. Seib, contributed.

The widely reported 1981 Gadhafi hit-squad scare later was deemed a likely phony by FBI Director William H. Webster. Asked about his sources for it, and for his exclusive details about their arms and targets, Walcott said recently that many of his intelligence and administration sources had offered the account, based on reports by an informant who had passed a polygraph test.

"I know they had one source; I don't know if they had more than one," Walcott stated, echoing a theme now being applied to his most controversial story.